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Marking the Land in North America

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Los Angeles: Coyotes, Smoke & Mirrors

Michaela Kahn

I.

1 I moved from North America to Great Britain a year and half ago to study for my PhD. During the first months, struggling to find my way, to distinguish objects in a fog of cultural difference, I sank each night into dark, fathomless, and dreamless sleep.

2 One night, about a year ago, I woke, tense, and then the noise which had roused me came again, faint, a sort of cackling. I relaxed into my pillow, comforted: it was the yipping of coyotes pre-dawn. But as I turned back to sleep, I remembered with a shock that I wasn't in North America—where Coyotes evolved during the Pleistocene—but in Great Britain where even the Gray Wolf is long extinct. I was desolate. How could I sleep, how could I dream, in a place without coyotes?

3 I grew up in Los Angeles, and though it might seem strange for a grid-locked mega-city like L.A., as a child I often woke to the yips, howls, and chatter of a pack of coyotes that lived in the hills near my home. In fact, coyotes have had a continuous presence in Los Angeles for tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of years (Gill 821). Coyote bones, fossilized in a matrix of asphalt tar, have been found alongside those of saber-toothed cats, dire wolves, and north American lions in the La Brea Tar Pits, right in the heart of downtown L.A. Of these ancient predators, only the coyote has survived (*Page Museum*).

II.

4 Once upon a time, a little girl dreams of a whale swimming under her bed. The massive creature, freckled with barnacles, drifts down near the sea-floor and the little girl

shifts, turns in her bed. She reaches out to touch the whale's skin and a sound fills the water, fills her head. The whale is singing.

5 The girl wakes from the dream but the singing continues. She lies in her bed as the sun rises, thinking of the whale, listening to the coyotes calling each other back home.

6 A few days later, not far away, a bulldozer rips through a seam of earth and scrapes across an enormous skull. There is also a rib, vertebrae, a six foot jaw bone.

7 The girl and her mother walk from their house to the building site where the hills are being levelled for a new 262 lot housing development. In only a few weeks the hills have become a fractured rubble of pale dirt. The thick gold grass is gone. The tangled Spanish mustard flowers, gone. The oak trees, gone. The bed of cattails at the base of the hill is now a mud flat criss-crossed with tire treads.

8 The bulldozers plunge on around them, cutting gashes into the hillside. But in one little corner, among some orange flags, a palaeontologist gathers up the fossilized bones of a ten million year old whale.

9 The girl's mind stutters—she has been to the beach, 35 miles away—how could waves have once upon a time rolled far above her head? The world spins upside down. She looks up at the blue sky and imagines water.

10 The palaeontologist lets them peek over the edge of the hole where she's working, but the girl can't distinguish the bones from dust.

11 "It's a shame," the scientist says. "The hills around here are rich with fossils, but unless a City Council requires a palaeontologist be on-site during development, we'll never recover them. Ancient bones will end up crushed into backfill. Within the next five years this area will be covered with houses and the bones will be paved over, like they were over there."

12 "That's where I live," the girl says.

13 The palaeontologist smiles, "Well then you're probably sleeping on top of whales and seals and prehistoric fish" (Robey).

III.

14 To tell you about Los Angeles, about the ways it is marked (its scars and wounds) and the ways it has marked me, I must tell you *how* I am going to tell you about Los Angeles.

15 As I prepared materials for this essay I could not settle comfortably into the discourse of a scholarly research paper—it is not how I *know* L.A. My discipline is creative writing, inherently an interdisciplinary mode of research, the realm of metaphor rather than assertion—and so my own approach here is cross-genre, a mix of creative non-fiction and fiction (which is not, however, to say it is *untrue*).

16 As a writer I am fascinated with language—although I have often been told that language is something that separates us humans from the rest of the world. However, as poet-ecologist Gary Snyder writes, "Languages are not the intellectual inventions of archaic schoolteachers, but are naturally evolved wild systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive attempts of the rational mind" (Snyder 127). Therefore, rather than acting as a barrier or prohibitive filter to understanding, language, creative and wild, is a place where human and non-human can meet. Indeed, the act of writing is linked in the tradition of nature writing to the act of perception itself (Slovic 352).

17 Perhaps, in this sense, writing, or storytelling, acts as a way of linking the individual consciously into the web of a culture or an ecosystem, completing a kind of feedback loop where object and subject come into relationship (West 2-32). This positioning of ourselves within the pattern of the world is important. Story can be a way for us to understand our place within a place, a way for us to re-member ourselves in context. Leslie Marmon Silko, writing about the Pueblo peoples, says, "...the ancient people perceived the world and themselves within that world as part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories" (Silko 268). Notice the visual symmetry of Silko's description of story with one of the iconic images of ecology—the way stories form webs within webs, nets within nets.

18 But additionally, I would argue that fiction may be the best way to write about a place which itself constantly slips out of grasp, revised, re-visioned, existing as fiction nearly as much as fact. For urban-historian Norman Klein, fiction serves as a key tool to most accurately capture the nature of Los Angeles as a place where forgetting is woven into both its landscape and history. As Klein set about writing his book, *The History of Forgetting—Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, he found that, "...my scholarship began to resemble fiction. There seemed no strictly empirical form of history that did justice to the fictional side of boosterism, to stories about urban myths that are built" (Klein, 7). Klein's book mixes fictional short stories with informant interviews and researched history.

IV.

19 But why would a historian turn to fiction?

20 It could be argued in some sense that Los Angeles does not, finally, exist (though you might argue the point if you're stuck on the 10 Freeway in rush hour traffic). Its boundaries, history, water supply, its sunshine and lifestyle, its iconic monuments—all slip out of grasp just as its very streets and neighbourhoods do, erased and refashioned in a perpetual cycle of re-development. L.A. is a metaphorical hall of mirrors where *image* has often proved more powerful than even the harsh realities of fire, water, and stone—and magical (marketing) words rather than facts form the basis for everything from its wealth to disastrous city-planning. Morrow Mayo, cultural critic of the 1930s wrote

> Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city, on the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a commodity; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash. (Quoted in Davis, City, 17)

21 In fact, unlike other cities whose boundaries are geographically or historically well-defined, the first thing a writer must do when discussing Los Angeles is to identify what they mean by *Los Angeles*: the city, the county, the iconic fantasy-world depicted endlessly in movies and TV, or the sprawling mega-city of 19 million people which crosses multiple counties, three states, two countries (the borderlands of Mexico), and covers a landmass about the size of Ireland. Most contemporary commentators, like L.A. expert Mike Davis, choose the latter. I, too, think of L.A. as something that has transgressed its own geography and colonized an entire corner of the North American continent.

V.

22 I remember one Sunday afternoon in the car with my father, driving from one featureless and unidentifiable suburb to another. The San Gabriel Mountains, only a mile or so from the highway, didn't exist that day—they'd been erased in a white-brown haze of smog. The car shuddered as the air-conditioning spluttered to life. My father, staring out the window at seven acres of flat, sun-baked parking lot in front of a vast shopping mall, shook his head, looked at me and said, "It's all smoke and mirrors, Mikki, smoke and mirrors."

23 I never asked him if he meant something philosophical about the state of the world and the condition of Los Angeles, about Hollywood and its sway over our lives, or if the glare of sun on concrete reminded him of mirrors and the soupy brown air of smoke.

VI.

24 L.A.'s history of smoke and mirrors stretches back even to its colonial origins. When Gaspar de Portola's expedition arrived in 1769, the valleys were in the midst of a period of unusually good rains and so reports of the area's lushness proved ill-founded (Reisner 8-9). And portentously, the morning after their arrival, camped on the banks of the Los Angeles River, Father Crespi and the expedition experienced an earthquake (Davis, *Ecology* 14).

25 Through time, perhaps one of the best examples of L.A.'s eternal state of paradox (and of how it marks the landscape and our minds) is its relationship to nature.

26 Despite being isolated, with no natural port, surrounded by desert and mountains, the Spanish proceeded to ignore the area's physical limitations and impose their colonial agenda of conversion, cultivation of old world crops, subjugation and erasure onto both the landscape and its indigenous people (Reisner 8-9). And the marks of colonialism remain inscribed on the people and on the land today, even if oftentimes their sources have been forgotten, or erased.

VII.

27 From a mission village, to a network of ranches, for a hundred years the area grew slowly. In 1870 Los Angeles was still a town of about 5,000 people. But then something changed. By 1900 the population was over 100,000. By 1930 it was over 1,000,000 (*Los Angeles Almanac*).

28 People, people, everywhere.

29 One late winter afternoon, driving home from university, I crested the rise of Kellogg Hill on the 10 Freeway. It was a rare smog-less day—radiant with light, the San Gabriel mountains were sharp and distinct with their dusting of snow, but in stark contrast, unfolding before me, were miles of concrete and asphalt, box-stores, housing developments, malls, stretching in relentless, heavy monotony to the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles. It was a world of static gray.

30 Looking out at the crushed landscape, something happened in my body, a shift. My skin, my bones stretched out, flowed out to merge with the contours of the earth. I was

suffocating under the weight of concrete. It was a shared trauma, my body was the land's body, and the land's was mine. I felt I would die if I stayed in Los Angeles. I struggled to catch my breath.

31 No wonder, by 1970 the land was buried under 3 billion tons of concrete, 250 tons per person, by now the figure is higher (Davis, *Ecology* 80).

32 Rounding the turn of the freeway off-ramp, I saw a patch of brilliant yellow flowers, mustard plants. The vivid colour blinded me, brought tears to my eyes. Here at least was a sign of nature breaking through the vise-grip of bulldozers and parking lots. I held onto the image of those flowers as a kind of hope.

33 Later I went to a friend with this story.

34 And he replied, with a sad smile, that those beautiful yellow-flowered mustard plants were, in fact, invaders... brought by the Spanish, who used them in Spain to demarcate property. In California the mustard went rampant, strangling out native species, causing extinctions, and forever changing the ecologies of the hills and valleys of the region. In fact, the terrible voracity of the wildfires that devastate California annually is due in large part to the invasion of mustard and other old-world species (Bell, DiTomaso, and Brooks 2).

35 His words left me desolate, my happy Hollywood ending shattered into fragments—beauty was suspect, nature was suspect, things were not what they seemed. More smoke and mirrors.

VIII.

36 What had happened between 1870 and 1900 to exponentially increase L.A.'s population? After the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1876, with its terminus in L.A., the opportunity for growth and wealth emboldened members of the City's elite to orchestrate an advertising scheme the magnitude of which was unprecedented. These men, called Boosters, spent thousands, and Nature was the lynchpin in their marketing strategy (Klein 28).

37 The pitch was Sun and Health, Fertile soil and Oranges. They advertised Los Angeles as the new Garden of Eden. L.A.'s messy colonial history and its present of racial prejudice (including the Chinese Massacre of 1871 during which the population of the city's Chinatown were robbed and terrorized and at least 18 were killed) were erased and whitewashed, twisted into a narrative of period romance. In fact this ' social imaginary' (as Klein terms it) was in part based on a work of fiction, the novel *Romona,* a best-seller which sentimentalized colonial life (Davis, *City,* 26-28; Klein 10).

38 It is difficult to separate Los Angeles as commodity from the Citrus industry, real estate speculation, and the city's thirst for water. Thanks to the new railroad, L.A's citrus now reached the market back East, reinforcing the image of L.A.'s healthy climate. It also lured farmers to the area to try their hand at citrus growing. At one point an enormous pyramid of fresh oranges (along with piles of pamphlets) were shipped, at huge expense, from town to town in the American Midwest. Imagine snow-bound farmers gazing on a tower of brilliant little orange suns—how could they resist? Thousands arrived, marshalling in the advent of L.A.'s first real-estate speculation bubble (Reisner 35-36).

IX.

39 My friends have a picture framed and hung over their kitchen table which I compulsively return to look at again and again—an original printed orange crate label, from the 1920s, which shows a landscape of orderly green orchards, snow-covered mountains, palm trees, and a red-tiled building, all glowing under the sun.

40 By 1909 my hometown, Covina, was the third largest producer of oranges in the world.

41 I stare into the dusty rows of trees in the picture. Trace the cellophane wrapped orange printed in the lower left corner labelled: *Sunkist.*

42 When I was six there were no orchards in my town, but still one small grove nearby at Foothills Boulevard soon to be turned into an apartment complex called 'Orange Grove Manor.'

43 What is this label a picture of? A past that never was. Near the mansion is an elegant Spanish lady in a black lace mantilla, fanning herself. Between the rows of trees happy peasants laugh while they pluck the ripe fruit. The scene strokes the underside of my brain, teases out a nostalgia for the unreal. Is that why my friends have framed it here?

44 In Covina, no one talked of the orange groves but there was a street called Citrus Avenue. And once a teacher of mine said: 'When I was young, all of this was orchards.' But the children didn't believe him. We grew up in a town of streets and apartment buildings, gas stations, and strip malls. If there had been so many trees, where could they all have gone? It wasn't logical. The children forgot. But after this I sometimes saw a lonely orange tree in someone's backyard and wondered where it came from.

45 I stare and stare at the painting until the trees begin to dilate. The leaves grow larger, distinct, deep green and waxy. I step forward, between the painted orange trees. It is hot, the air dry. The orchard smells of ink and dust. I step down one lane, duck beneath boughs into another. I reach out to pluck a bright orange from among the leaves. The painted-orange smells sweet. The leaves and rind stain my fingers.

46 Oranges brought people, more industry to L.A. They brought Hollywood into being. There would not be enough water. Eden would go dry. The water in Los Angeles was enough to sustain a few hundred thousand people... never millions, never ten, fifteen, nineteen million (Reisner 5).

47 I keep walking through the grove to the edge of the hills where an old, disused irrigation ditch lies strangled with mustard and wild oat grass. Near the ditch is an elegant silver tap. I turn it on and painted water pours out in a white stream. I touch the water with my finger and put my finger in my mouth. It tastes of paint, dust, salt. It tastes of metal and concrete, of 900 miles of pipe and aqueduct, bleeding the Owens Valley, the Colorado River, the Sacramento River, the American River dry, pumping two and a quarter billion gallons a day (*LADWP* and *MWD*).

48 After World War II with new industries, like aerospace, expanding in L.A., the land became more valuable as real estate than as orange groves. I wonder what 1,000 orange trees, burning every day for a decade smells like (Davis, *Ecology* 77-79). I wonder if the people who drove down the highway in the brown smog smelled it at all over the taint of diesel and tar. Did the smell disappear, vanish somewhere deep inside of them, forgotten when they shut their windows at night?

49 The painted sun burns into my skin. I turn back and a coyote appears, trotting along inside the smoke-blue shade of the trees. I take a step toward him and he vanishes. The trees begin to fade and I am back in the kitchen, staring at the crate label (Lee).

X.

50 The bodies of the orange trees, the smell of their destruction, become just another myth, gone the way a loved one is gone when they die—physically absent, spoken of less and less over time, but still present, taking up residence in another space, the place of dreams. All the vanished: orange trees, hillsides, rivers, are ghosts that haunt and colour the world, even if we aren't consciously aware of them.

51 D.H. Lawrence said, "...we are bleeding from the roots because we are cut off from the earth" (quoted in LaChapelle). This is where eco-criticism and eco-psychology, storytelling, and Los Angeles come together—the place of loss, of trauma, and ghosts.

52 The palaeontologist was right. The wild hills were covered by tract houses within another five years. Though Los Angeles is still host to roving coyotes, the pack I had listened to as a child dwindled in size, scattered, their habitat severely limited. By the time I was 22, I rarely heard their calls anymore. I didn't dream of whales under my bed anymore.

53 Elision is inscribed onto Los Angeles as surely as its streets and sewers, so that, inevitably, the city becomes mostly erasure, a gaping territory whose built form seems accidental compared to what is *not* there: the scars and phantom limbs of lost species, flattened hills, buried histories.

54 *

55 Tonight, about 200 miles south of Los Angeles, in a tiny village called Coyote, in Mexico, a little girl will dream of a whale. In the morning she will go down to the salt-crusted delta, where once the Colorado River flowed into the Sea of Cortez. Now on many days the river doesn't reach the sea at all. Everything is changing, the fish and mangroves are disappearing, the sea is getting saltier. The girl will touch the salty sand at her feet, and think of the whale in her dream, turning, singing (Oropeza and Lopez 9).

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ABSTRACTS

Growing up in Los Angeles I witnessed the erasure of wildness, not only from the metropolis, but from my local landscape. However, I realized that humans, too, were participating in this same fate. Erasure and loss is a shared trauma. Los Angeles' boundaries, history, its water supply, its sunshine and lifestyle, its iconic monuments—all slip out of grasp just as its very streets and neighbourhoods do, erased and refashioned in a perpetual cycle of re-development. L.A. is constructed as much of erasure as of steel.

Pendant mon enfance à Los Angeles, j'ai été témoin de l'effacement de la nature sauvage, non seulement au sein de la métropole, mais aussi dans mon propre paysage local. Toutefois j'ai compris que les humains, eux aussi, partageaient le même sort. L'effacement et la perte sont un traumatisme partagé. Les limites de Los Angeles, son histoire, ses réserves d'eau, son ensoleillement et son style de vie, ses monuments iconiques, tous nous glissent entre les mains, aussi impossibles à saisir que ses rues ou ses quartiers, qui sont constamment effacés et remodelés en un cycle sans fin de redéveloppement. L.A. est tout autant faite d'effacement que d'acier.

INDEX

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